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Tajikistan on the Road to Totalitarianism

Andrea Schmitz

Rather overshadowed by ongoing violence in Afghanistan and an unexpected political opening in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan is witnessing the emergence of a totalitarian system focused entirely on the president. Alongside legal moves and key appointments, ideological propaganda plays a central role. Two main trends are involved: the presentation of President Emomali Rahmon as bringer of peace and guarantor of national unity, and the establishment of a canon of “national” norms and values designed to enforce social and ideological homogeneity. The spectre of Islamic fundamentalism is instrumentalised to consolidate the ruling ideology, while surveillance and sanctioning enforce behavioural conformity.

Unlike the neighbouring Central Asian republics, Tajikistan’s consolidation as an independent state after the collapse of the Soviet Union was interrupted by a civil war (1992 – 1997). That event remains an important point of reference for the post-communist elite under President Emomali Rahmon, who came to power on the back of the war. The externally mediated 1997 peace agreement with the United Tajik Opposition (UTO) forced Rahmon to share power with his former adversaries. The Islamic Renaissance Party (IRP) played an especially prominent role, having reorganised itself after being the strongest group within the opposition alliance during the war. The IRP advocated a secular and democratic political order on the basis of Muslim values. In a country plagued by poverty, whose economic survival depends on labour migration and foreign loans, it found its base among the religiously con-

servative and the economically marginalised. After entering parliament in 2000 the IRP grew to become the strongest opposition force, claiming about forty thousand active members in 2014.

Elimination of Opposition

President Rahmon, whose supporters are organised in the People’s Democratic Party (PDP, the de facto successor to the Soviet-era Communist Party), has increasingly ignored the peace agreement since the end of the civil war. Former warlords have been successively excluded from politics, along with political entrepreneurs and businessmen who dared to challenge the President’s power.

The IRP was not exempt from this policy. Its open complaints of corruption and abuse of power by representatives of the



elite and its demands for good governance in harmony with the tenets of Islam presented a particularly serious challenge to the regime. But as long as it was represented in parliament (even if only holding a few seats) and its status as a legal political organisation was protected by the constitution, there was no legal possibility to exclude it from the political arena. In fact, the regime exploited the IRP's existence internally and externally to portray Tajikistan as a country orientated on democratic principles. At the same time, the regime concentrated on undermining the party's support through defamation and repression. In the March 2015 parliamentary elections, which were subject to numerous irregularities, the IRP failed to win any seats; only parties loyal to the regime have been represented ever since. A few months after the election the IRP's registration was annulled, its structures destroyed and leading members imprisoned.

In September 2015 the regime declared the IRP a terrorist organisation, followed by a merciless hunt for party members and their families. The persecution continues to this day and also targets activists who fled abroad.

Consolidating Autocracy

Elimination of the political opposition through concerted action by the organs of the state was accompanied by legal measures and appointments that institutionally cement the personal power of the President and his family. In December 2015, soon after the crushing of the IRP, parliament passed a law granting President Rahmon life-long immunity from prosecution. The same law stipulates that the President be referred to as "leader of the nation" (*peshvoi millat*) in official contexts including state television, together with the attribute "founder of peace and national unity". Soon thereafter, in May 2016, Rahmon secured his open-ended grip on power through a referendum that abolished the restriction to two presidential terms. At

the same time the minimum age for the presidency was reduced from 35 to 30 years. That would enable Rahmon's son Rustam Emomali (30) to stand in the 2020 presidential election.

Rustam Emomali has been mayor of the capital Dushanbe since January 2017, having previously served in two strategically important positions, as head of the customs service and (from 2015) head of the state anti-corruption agency. Other members of the presidential family also hold high offices of state. Ozoda Rahmon, the President's eldest daughter, is senator in the upper chamber of parliament and since January 2016 the President's chief of staff. Her husband, Jamoliddin Nuraliev, is First Deputy Chairman of the National Bank of Tajikistan and represents his country on the board of governors of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development. Other family members control lucrative businesses.

This concentration of political and economic power in the head of state's family is not specific to Tajikistan. The neighbouring republics also demonstrate more or less strong tendencies for dynastic rule and consolidation of power through institutional mechanisms. Kazakhstan's President Nursultan Nazarbayev, for example, can stand for office as often as he wishes thanks to a constitutional amendment adopted in 2007. He too was granted the title of "leader of the nation" (*elbasy*) in conjunction with a 2010 law granting him life-long immunity from prosecution.

Cult of Personality

Public shows of veneration of the head of state are an established feature of representation of power in post-Soviet Central Asia. But with his elevation to "leader of the nation" the cult of personality around the Tajik President attained dimensions that otherwise appeared exclusive to Turkmenistan. In the 1990s Turkmen President Saparmurat Niyazov established a totalitarian system encompassing all areas of society, which still exists today. Since the

de facto abandonment of the 1997 peace agreement and the associated abolition of political pluralism, Tajikistan now appears to be moving in a similar direction.

President Rahmon is omnipresent in the state media, while the veneration of the “leader of the nation” in word and image is everyday routine in the country’s places of education. This cultivates a narrative that the state leadership has exploited since the civil war to marginalise other more differentiated interpretations. In this version of events President Rahmon is the bringer of peace who saved the fatherland from the civil war and restored national unity by virtue of his outstanding abilities. Instrumentalisation of the IRP as a major threat is central to the dramaturgy of the narrative. The party is portrayed as a dangerous adversary seeking – even from exile and in alliance with Islamist terrorists – to divide the country, undermine peace and stability, and provoke a new civil war. The threat is conjured incessantly, even though the IRP has become irrelevant to Tajik politics since 2015.

Attempts to cast doubt over or relativise the official narrative are treated as an attack on the integrity of the state, as demonstrated by the repression of independent media. The weekly *Nigoh* (View), which supplied regular analysis on social and political issues, was forced to cease publication in November 2016. Other media, websites and social networks disseminating critical reports frequently find their work obstructed or blocked entirely.

Propaganda

The glorification of the President is not, however, generated exclusively through repression of those who fail to demonstrate sufficient enthusiasm. Active propaganda by high-ranking officials, academics, artists and performers is at least as important for generating loyalty. The inauguration of a new public holiday dedicated to the President in November 2016, for example, was the occasion for an essay-writing competition at all places of higher education on the

subject of “The Youth Follows the Leader of the Nation”. State television broadcast a documentary about President Rahmon entitled “A Man of Destiny”, while a theatre play (“The Chosen One”) was dedicated to him and the interior minister published an ode in the weekly *Tojikiston*. The poem, written in the classical *rubāʿī* form asserts that the President had been “sent by God” (*pajgomi jazdonī*) to the Tajiks. The chairman of the State Committee for National Security also took up the theme in the newspaper *Jumhuriyat*, which is read principally by public officials.

To dismiss such gestures as folklore would be to underestimate the strength of their political message. Such speech acts by high-ranking officials formulate implicit behavioural maxims, addressed both to government employees and the broader public. Indeed, one year after the publication of the interior minister’s sycophantic verses, the newspaper *Tojikiston* announced a prize for the best poem about the country and its leader. The minister’s work itself also lived on, being set to music in 2017 by a well-known Tajik pop quartet and disseminated on the internet as a video clip. Other Tajik pop stars also reach broad audiences with repetitively similar images praising the achievements of the “leader of the nation”.

Identity Politics

Containing Islam plays a central role in the efforts of the state elites to create a socially and ideologically homogeneous Tajik society. The success of the moderate IRP and the propaganda of various extremist groups demonstrate the significant mobilising potential of Islam. Containing it is thus a priority for the state.

Two components are crucial. Firstly, strict oversight of mosques and their personnel is intended to create a politically quiescent state Islam and banish all visible signs of religious practice from public space. Secondly, a canon of “national” values and associated behavioural rules intervenes deeply into the everyday lives of the population.

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Above all the hijab and the beard are stigmatised as “un-Tajik”. An “anti-radicalisation” campaign saw men having their beards shaved off under police supervision while women were publicly admonished not to wear the hijab. In April 2018 the Ministry of Culture issued a 367-page set of guidelines for Tajik women’s dress, which is not legally binding but does generate considerable pressure of conformity. Linguistic measures are also employed to ward off outside influence. Russian place names have been changed and Slavic endings on family names are regarded as undesirable. Popular Arabic names are taboo, with a recommendation to give children Tajik names instead.

The Law Governing the Practice of Traditions, Rites and Celebrations was amended in 2017 and 2018 to prohibit Islamic symbols at circumcisions, weddings and funerals, restrict attendance to close relatives and bar excessive spending. Birthday celebrations are limited to family members. Prominent figures are not exempted from these rules. Violations are strictly pursued and in the case of civil servants can lead to dismissal.

Through such massive interventions in the private lives of citizens, the abolition of political pluralism and ideological mobilisation the Tajik state, backed by numerous external actors with economic and security interests, is following an increasingly totalitarian trajectory. Europe, which is committed to cultivating democratic principles and rule of law in Tajikistan, should be aware that this is going to become even more difficult in future.

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